

In Quest of Dialogue on a "Hot" Subject

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Since I began studying Kanaky New Caledonia and other French Pacific territories more than a decade ago, I have tried to do what I can to encourage more dialogue across the artificial barriers created by colonial languages in the Pacific, especially between speakers of English and French. Despite some networking by activists and institutions of various kinds, linguistic colonialism has often tended to divide inhabitants of Oceania into relatively separate Anglophone and Francophone circuits. Perhaps no other issue highlights this lingering problem better than nuclear testing. The US and British atomic tests ended in the early 1960s, but the French tests did not begin until 1966 and lasted thirty years, spanning the era of decolonization in the South Pacific. French nuclear testing aroused public protest across the region, and many critics saw it as another aspect of ongoing colonial rule in French Polynesia and Kanaky New Caledonia (which has strategic nickel resources), despite active independence movements in both territories. After a last round of tests in 1995–1996, France closed down its Centre d'Expérimentation du Pacifique, and, with the United States and Britain, signed the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty of 1985. Paris has also granted more autonomy to French Polynesia and New Caledonia and has tried to improve diplomatic relations, cultural exchanges, and economic aid and trade with other Pacific countries. Given some recent crises in Anglophone Pacific states, however, France has vowed not to "abandon" its territories to disorder, the way it claims that "Anglo-Saxon" colonizers have done.

In early 2002, Jean-Marc Regnault, a historian at the University of French Polynesia, sent me an article that he had coauthored and had accepted for publication in French in the *Revue d'Histoire Diplomatique*. He asked if I knew of an English-language journal that would consider

publishing another version of it in translation. Because I was on the editorial board of *The Contemporary Pacific*, I brought the matter to the attention of my colleagues. They decided that since it had already been published but dealt with a contested subject, a revised version designed as a dialogue piece would be acceptable. My job would be to round up three or four qualified people who could comment on the essay and to persuade Regnault to respond to the commentaries. The topic was indeed still a “hot” one in the minds of many Pacific residents, despite the end of nuclear testing six years earlier. Indigenous victims of tests continue to claim compensation from the United States and Britain, and related issues such as US testing of anti-missiles, threats of nuclear waste dumping, strategic alliances with nuclear ship visits, and sovereignty movements in French and US territories remain important to many people. One major point of contention is whether the French tests (which were aboveground for the first eight years and then moved into shafts drilled into the Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls of the Tuamotus in French Polynesia) were or were not safe for the environment and the people living and working nearby. That issue, in fact, helps to shape the lines (and tones) of argument used in the dialogue.

Regnault is a well-published author on contemporary Pacific history, mostly in French. He has specialized in the history and the institutions of the French Pacific territories, trying to highlight the role played by those territories in the region’s perception of France and also the role that events in those territories have played in the evolution of French policy. In particular, he has written about French nuclear testing in the Pacific and done two studies of Pouvanaa a Oopa, the Tahitian nationalist, the most recent of which shows conclusively, based on declassified French documents, that Pouvanaa was framed by the French in 1958, when he was imprisoned for more than a decade. Regnault has also written on recent politics in French Polynesia, including an analysis of the dramatic overthrow of Gaston Flosse in the May 2004 elections (reconfirmed in March 2005) by Oscar Temaru’s coalition of pro-independence and autonomist parties.

I invited commentaries on the Regnault essay from five people. Stewart Firth, a historian then at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, wrote the best single-volume overview of atomic testing in the region, *Nuclear Playground*. Nic Maclellan, a journalist who has worked with Pacific Concerns Resource Centre in Fiji and the Australia Broadcasting Corporation, coauthored with French historian Jean Chesneaux two books on France in the South Pacific. John Taroanui Doom, who recently retired

from a long career with the Protestant church in Tahiti and last occupied the Pacific Desk of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, has worked closely with activists who are investigating the health of indigenous workers at test sites. He coauthored a response with Bruno Barrillot of the Center for Documentation and Research on Peace and Conflicts (CDRPC) in Lyon, France, who has published five studies of French nuclear testing. Gabriel Tetiarahi, a Tahitian activist who has organized land reoccupations and studies of the health of test site workers, is president of the Suva-based Pacific Islands Association of Non-Governmental Organisations (PIANGO).

I felt that a dialogue on a subject as “hot” as nuclear testing could also include political activists, but Regnault felt that the dialogue should have been confined to scholars only. His reply is therefore aimed primarily at Tetiarahi, and to a lesser extent at Barrillot and Doom, and not the others who commented on his essay.

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